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## Gender Roles in Japan: 17th and 18th Centuries

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The prevailing view of the relations between women and of men created important distinctions between the sexes, distinctions that greatly affected the lives of rural and urban Japanese during the 18th century.

The most famous treatise on Tokugawa-era women is commonly attributed to Kaibara Ekiken, who must be otherwise considered a friend and apologist of the common people. This moralist tract, "Greater Learning for Women," begins with a brief explication of the proper role and status of women in a moral society: "Seeing that it is a girl's destiny, on reaching womanhood, to go to a new home, and live in submission to her father-in-law and mother-in-law, it is even more incumbent upon her than it is on a boy to receive with all reverence her parent's instructions."

From this perspective, women appeared only as second-class citizens, and then really only in relationship to their husbands. It was implied that a woman had three obediences in the course of her life. As a child, she was to be obedient to her father; as a wife, she owed fealty to her husband; and as a widow, she was to obey her adult son.

Neo-Confucianism deemed women to be both morally incompetent and the source of emotional attachment, which was the only "sin" in Buddhism. Not only were women intrinsically immoral, therefore, but they were also the cause of immorality in men. Witness Kaibara's explanation: "The five worst maladies that afflict the female mind are: indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and silliness. Without any doubt, these five maladies infest seven or eight out of every ten women, and it is from these that arises the inferiority of women to men."

Obviously, any social philosophy that begins its consideration of women in this manner has little—and cold—comfort to give them in terms of their normal expected relations with men. Women were admonished to be long-suffering, forgiving, patient, honest, circumspect, industrious, modest, thrifty, and obedient—in short, to exemplify all those ideals that leaders advocated in their pets, their children, and their servants.

One practical outcome of such beliefs involved civil behavior. Women were expected to bow to everyone, even to their husbands, fathers, and parents-in-law. The female bow was supposed to be graceful and demure. Young women learned to bow in a kind of coquettish sideways simper while covering their lower face with an unfurled fan. Serving girls were required to proffer the serving tray as they extended their bodies in a kind of cat stretch while on their knees. Geisha (female servant-entertainers) studied upward of 20 different bows, each appropriate to the station of one's customers and to the occasion. Even common prostitutes were expected to know at least a dozen bows.

Female submissiveness, however, was not universal. Successful and influential women usually used their supposed weaknesses to control weak-minded men. If they were deemed to be overly emotional, they used emotion to gain what they wanted. If they were esteemed for their physical beauty, they forced men to suffer to win their favors. If they were expected to be silly and incompetent in dealing with business matters, they bested the male merchant by employing wiles and intelligence that were never to be expected of a woman. In short, women used what few powers were allotted to them.

Peasant women were very important to agricultural endeavors. They were often in the fields alongside the men. For certain tasks, women were in fact preferred over men. Commonly, gangs of peasant women transplanted rice seedlings communally. Plowing and other farm tasks could be done separately, but collective teams of women almost always transplanted together.

Men who were not actively involved in other agrarian tasks would toss the bunches of seedlings to the women, shore up paddy ridges, dredge irrigation canals, or provide a rhythmic accompaniment for the job. Traditional "call-and-response" work songs lightened the drudgery. The women, to the collective enjoyment of all, rhythmically answered the

men's double-entendre calls. Women could make ribald jokes about their sex lives or make suggestive taunts to the men; the time seemed to slip by faster, and the work seemed not as tiring.

Peasant women, like their *chónin* (city folk) counterparts, traditionally performed several cottage industrial and by-employment jobs, as maids, in the silk sheds, or in the embroidery, weaving, and tailoring establishments of the fan-, umbrella-, and paper-making factories. Many young women worked away from their families as maids, hairdressers, waitresses, or "hostesses" in the public restaurants, tea and sake shops, and theaters in the licensed quarters of the large cities. In times of bad economic fortune, particularly in famines, many young farm girls were enslaved into prostitution.

Frequently, *chónin* women worked side-by-side with their family's menfolk in artisanal and business endeavors. Few artisan-class women were allowed to ply their husband's or their father's trade if the job happened to be public and required physical strength. When city work was performed indoors (and thus outside the public eye), then women excelled in arts and crafts, many of which required dexterity, ingenuity, and aesthetic sensibility.

Some women, however, openly practiced traditionally male roles for male relatives who either could not or would not handle such tasks. Women sold and bought goods, collected debts, and kept the accounts of artisan families. Hen-pecked husbands were common stock characters in the theater, so much so that only a few words of dialogue were necessary to establish that the presence of women running the family household was not particularly rare.

Ironically, of the four official socioeconomic classes of the era, women in the top class suffered the most. That is partially because they were held to a higher moral standard than their peasant and *chónin* sisters, but it was also because of the nature of their husbands' work. Samurai men produced nothing but administration, which required a fair amount of technical education. Even if a samurai woman could learn to read and write the complex Sino-Japanese writing system, she never would be allowed to apply her learning to the actual work of government.

The writings of Kaibara did not represent unusual or radical ideas. During the 18th century, Japanese society in general acknowledged certain concepts of masculinity and of femininity, privileging the former over the latter. Consequently, relatively inflexible and pervasive conceptions of gender affected the countryside as much as they did the cities.

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#### Further Reading

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